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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRO'S PLANS TO ESTABLISH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH KOSOVO

SUMMARY: Senior GOM officials have told us that Montenegro will establish diplomatic relations with Kosovo by the end of the year. Any GOM move in this direction is unlikely to occur before a possible visit by Serbian President Tadic in November.  
END SUMMARY

Senior GOM officials have told us in recent days of Montenegro's plans to establish diplomatic relations with Kosovo before the end of 2009. The GOM said it had consulted with Macedonia about taking this step simultaneously - just as the two countries had synchronized their recognitions of Kosovo - and was taken by surprise when Macedonia and Kosovo announced diplomatic relations earlier this month.

So far, questions that have recently arisen in Kosovo about demarcation of the common border in the region of Pec-Rozaje have not knocked the GOM off stride. The Foreign Minister has so far tried to play down this issue, twice declaring in public that the GOM has received no official notification from Pristina. He has attributed the border claims to local citizens in Kosovo and has stressed Podgorica's intention not to "politicize" the issue.

Meanwhile, senior GOM sources have told us that they hope to send an Ambassador to Belgrade in the coming weeks (Serbia expelled Montenegro's former Ambassador to Belgrade after Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo in October 2008). Moreover, several sources have told us that Serbian President Tadic is planning a visit to Montenegro in the latter half of November. Interestingly, the GOM has assured us that Serbia has not, at least not yet, sent any warnings to Podgorica regarding diplomatic relations with Kosovo.

Comment: The GOM is trying to find the optimal time for taking the sensitive - and still domestically unpopular -- step of establishing diplomatic relations with Kosovo. On the one hand, as senior GOM officials have said in public, it would be natural for Montenegro to exchange ambassadors with a neighboring country it recognizes. Montenegro might also be motivated to take this step in the context of possible high-level interactions with the U.S. and other Western partners

and as NATO Allies appraise Montenegro's MAP application in the run-up to the December Ministerial.

On the other hand, Podgorica is mindful of its relationship with Serbia. Given Serbia's strong reaction to recognition in October 2008, it seems highly doubtful that Podgorica would establish diplomatic relations with Pristina prior to a possible Tadic visit. Such a visit - on top of President Vujanovic's visit to Serbia in May, Tadic's participation in a regional meeting in Montenegro in June, and Serbian PM Cvetkovic's one-day trip to Montenegro last week -- would be an important step in putting the bilateral relationship on a more positive and solid footing, something eagerly sought by the GOM. Moreover, the GOM might be watching the timing of oral arguments in the ICJ-Kosovo case. In light of Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo almost immediately after the UNGA referred Kosovo to the ICJ a year ago, Podgorica might wish to avoid timing another important decision vis-a-vis Kosovo and the ICJ that could be interpreted as hostile by Serbia.

In the meantime, it would be damaging for the prospects of an early establishment of diplomatic relations if Kosovo officially raises border issues with Montenegro. Without prejudging the border issue, it would be far preferable that any possible border questions be discussed among two equal partners that enjoy normal diplomatic relations. Otherwise, border issues could be used as a pretext by Montenegro to delay the establishment of diplomatic relations until they are resolved.

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